

"The Peril and the Prize"

Written Expressly for this Magazine by David Kyle Nicholson

CHAPTER I.

LET others say what they may, I claim that for a bachelor there is no comfort like that of a furnished room. A hotel gives a certain measure of independence, but you are never for a moment unaware that you are in a hotel. You are one of many, and no matter how long you stay, you never feel that you are at home. A boarding-house is a place where you have all the disadvantages and none of the advantages of hotel life. Private board, so called, means that your privacy is in all respects reduced to the minimum. Extensive apartments make a man feel as if he were a fish and the only one in, say, Lake Ontario. But a well-furnished room with good light, proper heat and an obliging landlady will insure all the comfort any reasonable man can desire; and the feeling that he is lord of all within his four walls comes to him and comforts him when, wearied and disgusted, he comes home at the close of a trying business day.

I had engaged such a room as I had long desired. It had no outlook worth mentioning, but I am much more inclined to reading than to looking out of the window. If I were anxious for a view of out of doors, I had only a short walk to Riverside or Central Park. The room was spacious, my own belongings were duly placed, the fire was blazing in the grate and I settled down to my first evening's enjoyment of my newly occupied apartment. I was so well satisfied that I felt that it would be years before I should have occasion to choose other quarters. And yet so uncertain are the affairs of human life that I was destined never to spend a single night within those walls, even though the clock was just then striking the hour of ten.

I leaned back in my chair in dreamy enjoyment, accentuated by the fact that tomorrow was Thanksgiving Day and there was no going to the office. I am not lazy, but who does not enjoy a respite from the regular daily grind of business? I determined the hotel at which I would dine on the morrow, the excursion I would take, the theatre I would attend.

Then, though my years are not so many as they are now, I fell to thinking of the past. Everything is relative and the young man looks back a few years to what seems the distant past and sings "Auld Lang Syne" as sentimentally as the most ancient of his elders.

This was especially the case with me, who, in coming to the city years before, had in a moment completely severed with the past. On leaving the little academy which had furnished me with all that I could afford in the way of higher education, I had gone straight to the city and by an odd chance stumbled into a satisfactory position. I exchanged letters with my friends and relatives, but they grew less and less frequent and harder and harder to write. I had a few new-formed friends in the city, but they occupied little of my time or thoughts. So I worked through the day and at night went to my room and read and thought about the past.

That evening, which above all others must stand out in the memories of my life, I was thinking, as I often did, of Lucy Dean. I had known her but a year when I was at the academy, but she was still before me, a joyous vision such as I never expected to see again. There was a mystery about her, too, or rather, about her father and family. They had come to the little town and rented a house and Lucy had gone to the academy; the father had walked about with his head bowed and an aunt had kept the house and kept out visitors; and people wondered and talked and shook their heads. Where they came from nobody knew. Often-times the question was hinted and sometimes put point blank.

"Papa does not want me to talk about his affairs," Lucy would reply with so sweet a smile that there was no chance for offense. The two elders were shorter and more decisive in their replies.

One day the news went round the little town that the Deans were gone. They had rented a furnished house and the rent was paid three months in advance. They owed nothing in the village. Nobody had any word of their going. Nobody had seen them at the station. They had no horse, no carriage. They had not engaged any, so far as anybody knew. Their flight

Their coming had been a mystery, their going had been a greater. They had gone had been absolutely noiseless and unseen, as completely as if they had never existed. Now seven years had passed and the mystery was as complete as ever. Not a single inquiry ever had been received to indicate that elsewhere in the world was anybody interested in their coming and going.

Now for good or ill I had chosen to make Lucy Dean the object of my romantic and sentimental regard. It was not sufficient to make me lose any of my good three meals a day or to cause me any particular grief at any time. It was rather a luxury than otherwise. It filled my dreams whenever I chose to be sentimental, gave me a chance to believe that I, too, had had my romance and supplied a vision whenever I hummed "Annie Laurie" or other lovesick tune. Also it is possible that her memory had prevented me from falling in love with some pretty stenographer whom I met in the course of my work and marrying and living happily ever after in a Harlem flat, up four flights of stairs.

I looked around my comfortable lodgings which I had determined should be my home for many years to come, and then took down a volume and began to read for the thousandth time Thackeray's "Cane-Bottomed Chair," sentimentally imagining that many years had passed and that I had grown old and white-haired, but still dreaming of the days of my youth and fitting my Lucy to the Fanny of the poem. True, she had never been in the room and I had no cane-bottomed chair, but when we are determined to be sentimental we do not stick at trifles.

I could hardly be blamed for my sentiment. With or without reason, sentiment is bound to play a part in our lives and—I had seen Lucy Dean. Seldom is given, below the stars, a vision of beauty such as I had beheld in the brief months of our acquaintance. The clear blue eyes, the light, rippling brown hair, the faultless complexion, the high, smooth brow, the frank, innocent expression, the merry laugh, the silvery voice, the dancing step never could be forgotten. And she was good as beautiful, with the strong intelligence necessary to complete goodness, kind, sympathetic and true. Never, I felt assured, would I see her again, and though I might grow old, Lucy would remain to me always the same.

How long I might have gone on dreaming I cannot say. We never may know, though we think we may, what would have happened if something else had not. I was brought back to earth by a loud knock at my door. I promptly opened and confronted my visitor.

It was the man with the raw-beef face and dingy green uniform of a public hack-driver.

"Ziss Mr. Westmark?" he asked in the language and husky voice of his kind.

"That is my name," I answered.

"Zare's a lady down in de street wants 'a see you," he said.

"All right, I'll come down," I said, though with profound wonder as to who could wish to see me. It must be, I vaguely thought, some distant relative from the country come to let me know the hotel at which she was staying.

I followed the hackman downstairs to the street where the carriage stood at the curb. He at once climbed to his seat after flinging open the door of the carriage. A face leaned forward from within.

"How de do? I suppose you don't know me?" came a thin voice. "I am Mrs. Minton, Professor Monroe's sister," she said, after I had admitted that I did not know. "The professor is in Brooklyn for a few days and he wants you to take dinner with him to-morrow."

"Why," I said, in astonishment, "I heard that Professor Monroe died three years ago!"

"Well, of all things in the world!" said the woman, with a feeble laugh. "If he is dead it is within the last hour. How on earth did you ever hear such a thing as that?"

"I had a letter from one of my classmates," I said.

"Well, you come over to Brooklyn to-morrow and see whether he is dead or not. Do you know if there are any more of his boys in the city?"

"I believe there are several," I said. "I will try to look up such addresses as possible and let you know to-morrow."

"I think it would be better," she said, "if you would give me the names now, and I will look up the addresses and have as many of them as possible to dinner to-morrow. But won't you get into the carriage while we talk? The air seems very chilly to me."

"Certainly," I said, and stepped within. Just then the hackman shouted out some indistinguishable words.

"What is it?" said the woman, rising and putting her head out of the carriage.

"I say as how I've been drivin' round long enough," he said. "I've got to see the color of your money or I'll drive youse to the station, see?"

"No need of your insolence!" said the woman, taking out her purse and stepping to the sidewalk. "How much is the bill?" What the hackman's response was I never knew, for the woman flung shut the door of the carriage, and at the same moment there was a forward lurch and the horses went away at a gallop.

I jumped up in the dark and tried the door of the carriage, but I could find no way to open it. I shouted, but in vain. I could hear a steady clattering of what I knew not, but it was sufficient to drown my voice, shut within the close confines of the swiftly moving vehicle.

On the carriage went—on and on and on, in spite of all my frenzied efforts to escape. Why I was being taken thus was a mystery. At first I thought of the ludicrous, if annoying, explanation that the woman was an impostor who had given the hackman the slip after beating him out of her fare and that the latter was taking me to the police station to answer for the sins of another. This explanation faded as the carriage continued on and on. I heard the crash of the elevated trains, the clang of the street car gong, together with the continuous beat of the horses' feet upon the pavement. Presently all these sounds ceased and we were going along dirt roads. The city was being left behind. I threw myself back on the cushions and defiantly awaited the outcome of my adventure.

I was utterly and hopelessly puzzled as to why anybody should take the trouble to kidnap me, for I was neither a maiden fair, a soldier brave nor a kingdom's heir, a traitor vile nor a millionaire, and why they should take such elaborate pains to carry off a broker's clerk with six dollars in his pocket was too much for my comprehension.

On we went. Like other foolish and impatient persons I asked if that ride ever would find an end. Of course it found an end, as does whatever is evil and distressing in life. The motion of the carriage slowed and then stopped.

There was a long wait and then the carriage door was thrown open and I looked upon a landscape brilliantly lighted by moonlight.

"Come out, young feller," said the husky voice of the driver. "Nobody's goin' to hurt you. But if you try to break away or go puttin' up a fight you'll come to a sudden stop, see?"

I saw, fortunately for my health and comfort. There were five or six fellows standing about and as tough-looking a lot as one could wish to see.

"This way, cully," said one of them, seizing my arm.

"Hands off!" I said, angrily, shaking myself loose. "I am not trying to get away. Here I am. What do you want with me?"

"Want you to go in the house and keep quiet!" said one of the gang.

"Mebbe you'd like to say something to me in particular!" said the one who had laid hands on me.

"I certainly would!" I said. "If the rest will see fair play, I'll promise you an interesting two minutes."

"I'm ready for you, all right," the bully said.

"Get out, you fool!" said another, shucking him unceremoniously aside; "the boss wouldn't stand for it."

"Don't be afraid, young feller," he continued, "you're goin' to get a square deal. Just be peaceable and you're all right. But there ain't no use gettin' mad about it 'cause there's no good in tryin' to buck the whole gang. Right in at that door!"

Common sense again came to my rescue. It would have been a fine piece of heroics for me to cry "Die, villain!" or something of that sort and fling myself at the toughs, but there is no doubt that I would have gained a broken head, a bloody nose, two black eyes and an assortment of sore, if

not broken, ribs in return for my demonstration. I thought it over and decided to let the villains die at some other time and place, though I prayed that it might be soon. I walked unhesitatingly through the door and into a dark hall. The door closed with a bang, and I heard it locked from the outside. There was an uncomfortable wait, and then a door opened at the other end of the hall and a fat, middle-aged woman appeared, carrying a small lamp.

"How do?" she said, as she came forward with a kind of vacant grin, apparently intended to express welcome.

I stood stiffly and did not return her greeting.

"This way and I'll show you your room," she said, still grinning and showing a row of teeth which, while perfect, were absurdly small and with wide spaces between them.

I could see no reason for standing in the hall, so I followed without a word. Up two flights of stairs I went, and then I was shown a room which, while undoubtedly a prison for the time, was a most luxurious one. I saw a bed with snow-white linen, easy chairs, a table, a bookcase filled to overflowing. The room was spacious, the ceiling was lofty, the carpet was thick and fine. A grotesque feature, considering the undoubtedly criminal nature of the place, was a huge family Bible, occupying the place of honor on the table at the centre of the room.

"That looks comfortable, doesn't it?" said the woman, pausing at the door. "I hope the boys hain't been rough with you nor nothin', 'cause they had orders not to be. You'll be treated right, don't be afraid. The boss wants to see you a little bit in the mornin' and then you'll go all right, an' mebbe a tidy bit in your pocket. It's more of a joke like than anything else."

"Quite a joke," I said, stiffly.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, shutting the door, which closed with a spring lock. I saw nor heard anything of the gang, but I knew that they were not far away; and it would be folly to attempt rushing past the fat woman who was constituted my jailer. She came back speedily, bearing a plate of sandwiches and a glass of milk.

"You'll find these are good," she said, putting them on the table. "You must be hungry after your long ride."

"Is it very far?" I asked, thinking thus to gain a clue, even if a slight one, as to where I was.

"Well, now! Do you think I'm such a green one as to answer questions like that?" the woman answered, laughing and shaking her fat—well, I believe that polite writers would probably call it her sides.

I drew up to the sandwiches without a word, and the woman was gone, bidding me a cheerful good-night.

I was indeed hungry, and the sandwiches were certainly good. I ate until I was satisfied, and then, though I knew it was far toward morning, I began looking around the room. The window was not barred, but it was at least thirty feet from the ground, and I could hear the steady crunch of the gravel in the walk in the garden beneath, which told me that there was some one doing duty as sentry to prevent any effort at escape. The walls were of stone, the door was of heavy oak. If I had attacked it with my penknife probably after many hours I could have pierced it, but to what purpose? I was there to stay until my captors saw fit to give me freedom.

I looked at the books. They were of an assortment such as any person of taste might select, and certainly nothing likely to indicate a criminal or even morbid taste. I looked in the flyleaves for some inscription, but found nothing, such search in one case having been anticipated by tearing out the writing. I looked at the pictures on the wall. There were three of them. Paintings of rare merit. One was a landscape showing an excellent combination of lake and mountain. Another showed several boys engaged in a game of marbles. The other was a portrait of a lady, and in front of this I stood with starting eyes, just as my lamp, burning low, started to flicker preparatory to going out. It was a picture of Lucy Dean.

CHAPTER II.

The expiring light left me no choice but to go to bed. I had expected, in my feverish excitement, to lay awake until morning, but Morpheus is a god who plays

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